SPAWN

THE DARK AGES

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10

DIGITAL EDITION

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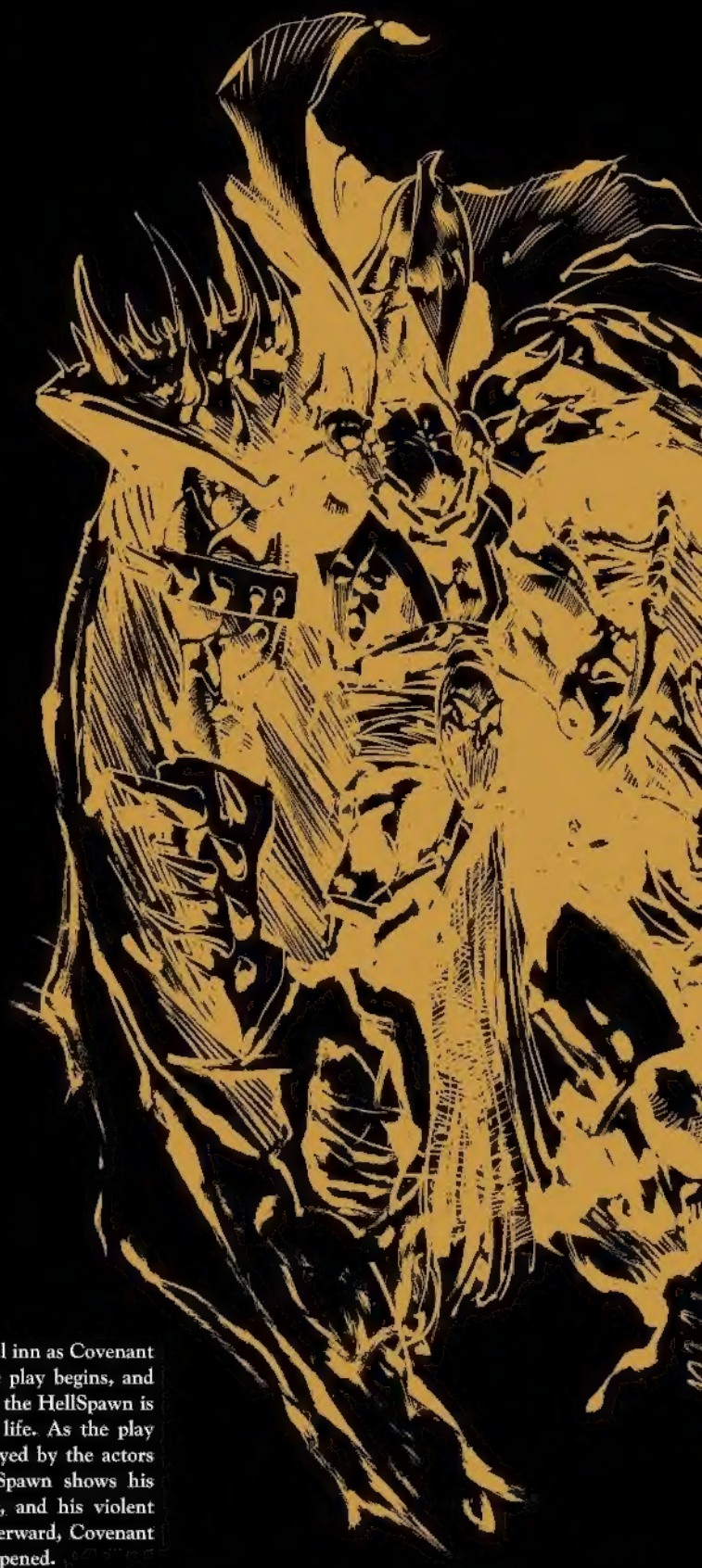
Todd McFarlane & Image Comics Present

A Child's Crusade Part I

A Questing Tale

Dedicated to Matylda-Mai with all my love. Daddy.



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SPAWN DARK AGES 9 SUMMARY:

A play is being presented in the courtyard of a local inn as Covenant arrives to observe the evening's entertainment. The play begins, and centers around a local myth. It is a story with which the HellSpawn is familiar; the story is about an episode in his own life. As the play progresses, Covenant compares the events as portrayed by the actors with the way things actually occurred. The HellSpawn shows his displeasure with the liberties taken by the players, and his violent outburst causes the actors and audience to flee. Afterward, Covenant sits alone and reflects upon the way things really happened.

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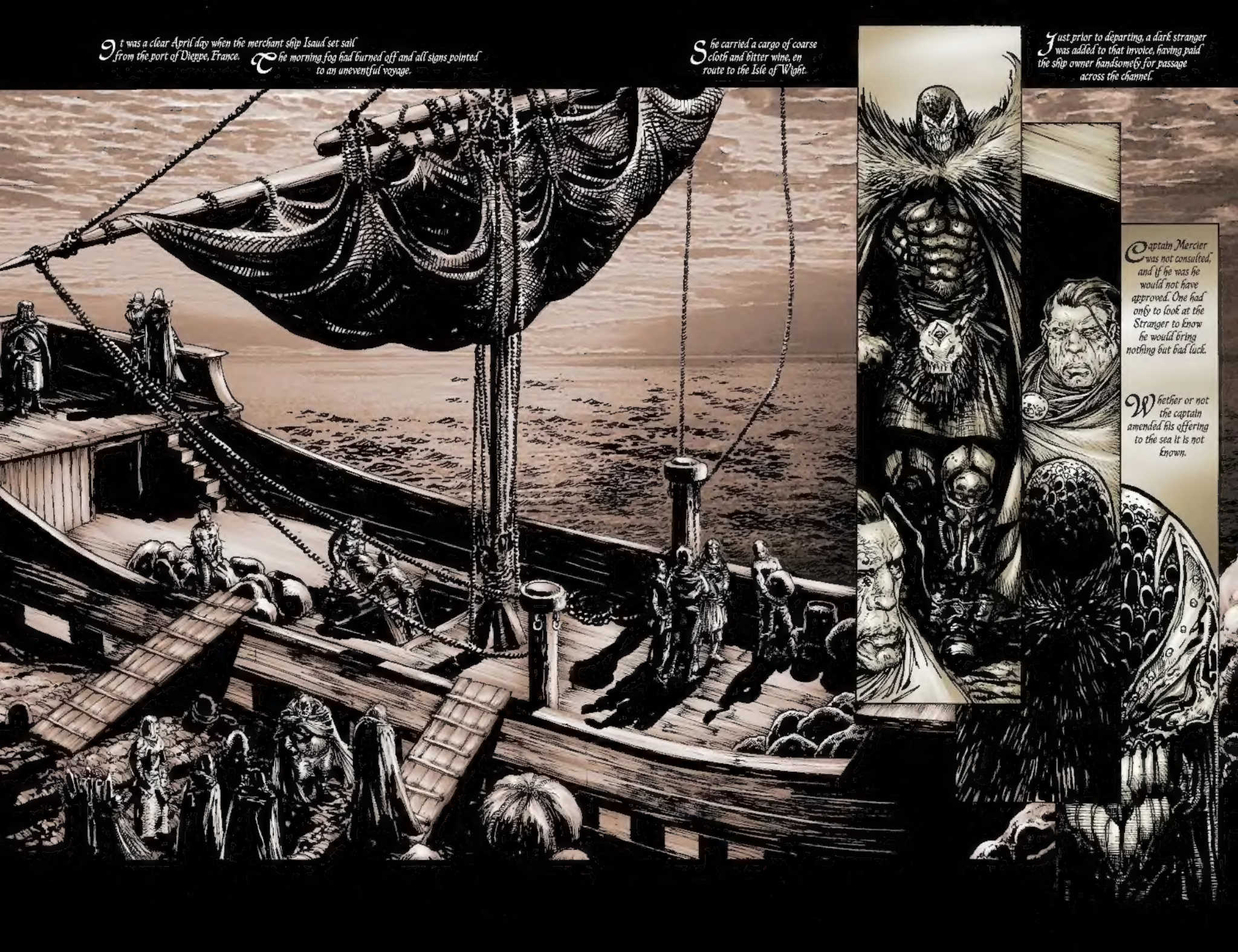
In the days when the earth was flat and men relied on arcane auguries to navigate the seas, it was customary to offer a sacrifice to the waves to ensure a safe voyage.
To enter the sea is to enter a foreign house and one dare not proceed without bearing a gift.


It was a clear April day when the merchant ship Isaud set sail from the port of Dieppe, France.
The morning fog had burned off and all signs pointed to an uneventful voyage.
She carried a cargo of coarse cloth and bitter wine, en route to the Isle of Wight.
Just prior to departing, a dark stranger was added to that invoice, having paid the ship owner handsomely for passage across the channel.
Captain Mercier was not consulted, and if he was he would not have approved. One had only to look at the Stranger to know he would bring nothing but bad luck.
Whether or not the captain amended his offering to the sea it is not known.

In the cramped hold, fellow passengers looked fearfully at the stranger. Whatever sins marked his brow would only bring trouble to all aboard.
Look at him. He has the look of the Devil, I tell you.
I do not hear him deny the charge.
Keep your evil eye to yourself, stranger. I am a Christian man, and I am not afraid of your kind.
Less than an hour passed before the weather turned. Out of nowhere, a violent squall emerged. Waves assaulted the hull like battering rams, wind tearing savagely at the sails.
Captain Mercier tried to steer south towards calmer seas, hoping to wait out the coastal storm.
But the tempest seemed to follow the Isaud wherever she went.

Hours later, when the vessel finally broke apart off the English coast, there was no doubt among the sailors and travelers whose fault this disaster was.
This... this is your doing! We should have thrown you overboard at the first sign of trouble.
I curse you, stranger. May the devils take you, so you may never do harm again!
To the very end, the Stranger never uttered a word, nor did he shift an inch from where he sat.
He seemed only to wait his doom, as passive and as immovable as a stone.
If he held any remorse, if he pitied his fellow men their awful fate, he did not show it...

Forty years later.

A king named John sits on England's throne, after years of covetous rivalry with his brother Richard, called "Lionheart."

French entanglements and high taxes have caused many barons to take arms against the crown. Having lost a war overseas, King John now faces the possibility of one at home.

Crispin Fletcher was a quiet man with the soul of a dreamer. Around the fire he would tell his children tales of far-off lands and epic battles.

But for all his tales, he had never been more than ten miles from his home.

So if for a day he could pretend he was a traveling warrior, a rogue hero battling evil and righting wrongs, he was happy for it.

Although the shire of Rackham seemed a world away from such intrigues, word had gone out to all able bodied men to assemble for inspection.

Are you a soldier now, daddy?

No, we're just going to be counted. "Presentation of Arms in Preparation for Exigency." It's a bit like dress-up, I suppose..

Now come on, give us a hug!

You look handsome, papa.

Thank you dearie. Now where's Maeve?

On the road to Darrow's Field, Crispin ran into other men, friends and neighbors of his, making their way to the assembly.

There was Uther the Butcher, who delighted in ribald stories which invariably involved eager virgins and members of the clergy; and Tom Cowper, who had married Crispin's sister.

Ullo, boys! Days of fortune and glory, is it?

Bloody great pain in me arse, is what it is.

They were a motley bunch, none would deny that. Proud, strong men they may have been, but they were certainly no army.

If the king needs our help, he might as well surrender now! Ha, ha!

So how are the children, Crispin?

My pride and joy, Tom. Pride and joy.

Meave should be marrying soon, eh?

Not if she has anything to say about it. And that girl has something to say about everything.

At 14, Crispin's daughter Maeve teetered on that thin line which divides child from adult. Tall and pretty, nearly any man would gladly claim her for a wife.
But Maeve was willful and headstrong, and the thought of domestic obedience seemed no better than a prison sentence to her.
She had always been a wild one. Her father often joked she was part rabbit, the way she loved to run loose in the woods.
This was her temple. She could never understand why men would clutter in the musty confines of a churchhouse when it was clear that God himself preferred the outdoors.
She knew the woods the way one knows a good friend. She knew every plant and tree and flower by sight: Foxglove and bluebell, cowslip and nightshade, holly, oak and ash.
When the wind shook the trees, she imagined that the woods spoke to her.

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If the woods called out a warning to her that day, Maeve did not hear it.

She had gone to "race" twigs in the Fiddler's stream, when she came upon a strange sight: There was blood in the water.

She rushed through brush and bramble until she came to the edge of Darrow's Field. The air fell still and her heart pounded fiercely as she looked upon the awful sight before her.

Everything was still. Deathly still. There was no sound at all.

No sound save for the buzzing of flies...

There they were, laid out like freshly mown hay. All the men of her village. Marcus the wheelwright, Carrick the tanner, Cole the blacksmith, Evan the chandler...

It was a moment later when she wailed out loud.

Her young mind grew dark, seemed to shrink into itself, as if the stark reality could not be made to fit with her notions of how the world worked. Her skin grew hot and her breathing became heavy. Teardrops stung her face.

What had transpired here she could not guess. But one thing she held true: This had not been war. This was no work of man. This was evil.

Maeve bent down over her father's broken body, cradling his lifeless head in her trembling hands.

Her tears fell like hot rain on his face. The beloved face of her father, her hero, her model of manhood.

She had missed him this morning. She had already run off to play in the woods when he left. She had missed even that last chance to say goodbye.

She kissed him one final time, kissed the lips that had passed a thousand bedtime tales, that scolded and praised and blessed her all her life.

In that moment, whatever thin veil of innocence which may still have clung to her was rent asunder forever.

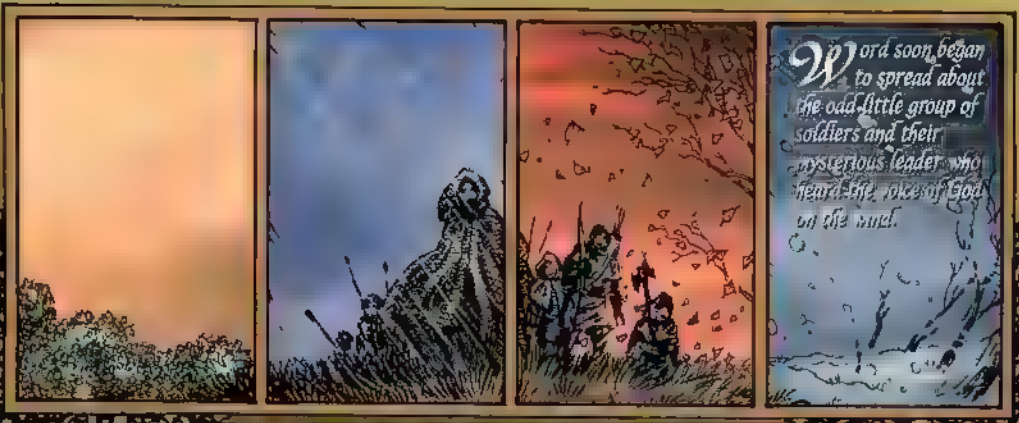
All around her, the wind rose up, shaking the trees in a great, whispering chorus.
Above her, the afternoon clouds parted and the sun burned down from heaven and dried her tears.
The wind grew greater and the trees once again spoke to her
And in their murmuring, Maeve knew that she could hear the voice of God.

The word of the massacre had spread quickly and people of the shire had gathered that night to mourn and to discuss what might now be done.
How could they survive without their men to provide for them? Who would defend them in case of war?
In that congregation of old men and newly made widows, a young voice spoke out.
I have talked to God. There is a great wickedness loosed upon the land. It now falls upon the heads of the innocent, of the children of those slain today, to avenge their father's deaths.
Child! Hold your tongue. You know not what you speak of.
I know exactly what I speak of. God has charged me with a holy crusade
A stunned silence fell over the room
It was ludicrous, of course. Perhaps even blasphemous. The women had just lost their husbands, they were not about to lose their sons in the bargain
She has always been a strange girl, but clearly the shock of seeing her father's corpse had driven her mad.

I am not a fool. I know you shall require proof, and God will provide it.
Maeve then looked upon the sad, lined faces of the bereaved and offered a strange comfort to them, delivering "messages" from the departed
She told Uther's wife how the loud, boisterous butcher would call her his "Lucky Penny" whenever they were alone
How he had courted her with violets and pretty rhymes when in their youth. Maeve even recited some of the poems.
She told the Blacksmith's widow that her husband had secreted away some money, in case of emergencies, and that she would not have to go begging.
To each of the widows, she offered up tender words, pet names, private information that only the deceased could know.
Maeve assured them all that they were well loved and that their husbands were now in heaven, but the murdered must be avenged.
Before long, even the greatest doubters were convinced God spoke through her. But still, she was but a child.
Do not fear for us. We will not go to battle alone.
God has chosen a champion to fight for me, and I am to go and seek him out.

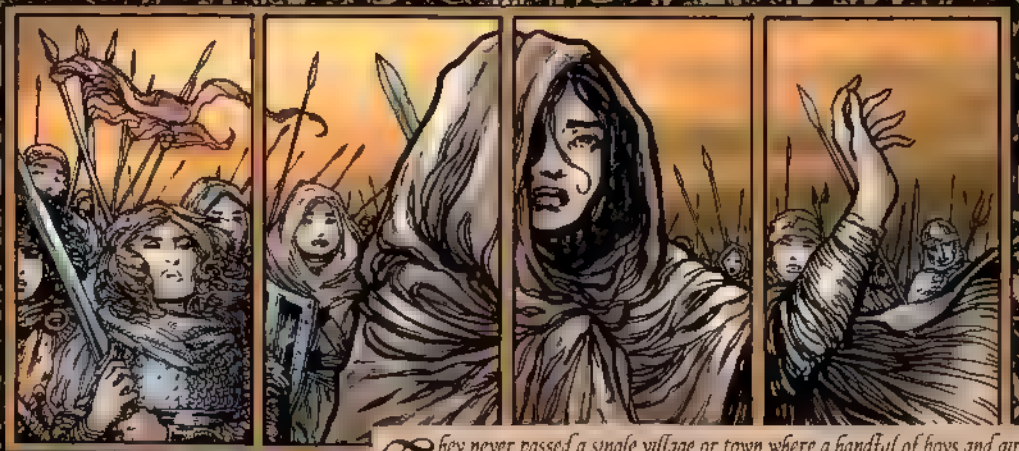
They set out the next day, a ragged band of half-orphaned children who had never been away from home.

Their fathers' weapons were unwieldy to them, their helmets and shields ill-fitting, but they walked as proud as any Templar that day


Word soon began to spread about the odd little group of soldiers and their mysterious leader who heard the voice of God on the wind.

Some saw her as a curiosity, a freakish amusement they had to witness for themselves.

Others saw her as a threat and held close their own children when they figured off in the air to join her mad parade.
But children did join. Scores of them.



They never passed a single village or town where a handful of boys and girls didn't leave their families to take up the banner for Maeve's Crusade.

They trusted her completely. She was kind and fair and made everyone feel welcome. But when the mood took her, she could be a stern master.

They called it "the Look." When her eyes would stare at some distant, unseen thing and she would speak in low, honeyed tones. Then, they knew, she was speaking for God.
But mostly it was a joyous time more holiday than holy quest. Still, Maeve kept them moving.
They trooped west towards Tintagel, on the coast of Cornwall. A storied place that still echoed with legends of Arthur and noble knights.
There, Maeve told them, they would find their champion.
Around the campfire, the children would muse over who this paladin they were seeking might be. Parsifal? Gawain? Perhaps even Arthur himself, returned from Avalon in England's darkest hour.
Here
Then one day, they reached a great cave. Its mouth was surrounded by skulls and spears, and crude warnings against entering were scrawled upon the rock.
This was clearly not a place of mythic heroes and fabled knights. This was a place of death.

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Maeve would enter alone. There are some dragons, she said, one must slay on one's own.
Taking up a torch, she moved into the dark womb of the cave, her footsteps echoing like thunder claps.
Her heart beat faster and faster.
She had come to the place of deliverance at last.

The creature was chained to the rock itself and blanketed in dust and cobwebs. It took all of Maeve's strength to pry the rusted manacles apart.
The poor thing could not even speak, could barely stand.
Peter! Talbot! Come help me.
The Dark Thing winced before the sunlight, coughing and wheezing as he tried again to talk.
Talbot, fetch the blanket.
Good sir, I am here to charge you with a holy quest. Tell me how I might comfort you.
No...Leave me be...Your God had no use for me...
I -- I fought a crusade once before...
I am still paying for those sins. Whatever you seek, I am not it.

I know all about your sins, Lord Covenant. How you were cast in to the pit and then cursed to walk once again the world of men.
How you eschewed your hellborne powers and wait silently for the day a miracle will come and deliver you from your sins. I tell you, that day has come.
H-how could you know that?
I know it because God has told me. How else could I find you? Who still living even knows you're here? God is ready to forgive you, Lord Covenant.
But you must earn that forgiveness.
How? Tell me!

There is a great evil moving through this land. A legion of the wicked. They took my father and I will see him avenged.
You are to aid me in this. You shall lead a great and righteous army against the throne of darkness. And then, finally, God will welcome you home.
An Army? What army?
This one, my lord. They await your command.

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